

# State Policies to Enhance Transitions Into Kindergarten

Laura Bornfreund, Danielle Ewen, Aaron Loewenberg, Davida McDonald, Alyssa Rafa and Matt Weyer

The [transition into kindergarten](#) is a [critical juncture](#) for young students and their families; it can also be a stressful time. The start of kindergarten signifies the beginning of elementary school and everything that may come with it: a new building, new teachers, new expectations, and a different routine and culture. These new students transition into kindergarten from different settings, bringing with them a variety of assets and experiences. [Research shows](#) that transition activities that are authentic, meaningful, ongoing and well-designed make a difference for children's kindergarten experience; and that the quality of the transition can either exacerbate or ameliorate existing inequities related to success. Examples include data sharing, identifying barriers to learning, improving alignment and coordination, and enhancing family engagement. These activities may foster better relationships between families and schools, provide teachers with increased knowledge of the needs of incoming students and establish deep connections across the community and among programs that support parents of young children. Education Commission of the States' [updated K-3 50-State Comparison](#) finds that 23 states plus the District of Columbia have state policies to guide the transition from pre-K to kindergarten, and 17 states require family engagement in the process.

## A Systems Lens for Transitions Into Kindergarten

From a holistic perspective, this transition necessitates a focus on the social, emotional and health needs of children and families; the culture in a community and in individual schools; and the resources available to support individual children, family members, teachers and school leaders. It requires relationships, collaboration and partnerships across the community, as well as time and energy from school leaders well before children enter their building. State policymakers, from state departments of education and health and human services agencies, governors' offices and state boards of education, all have a role to play in setting policy goals to enable successful transitions for young children. Acknowledging the complex nature of this transition will enable state and district leaders to identify the necessary pieces to build comprehensive systems of support.

Using a systems lens, states can address and improve kindergarten transitions for all students. Currently, many children have inequitable experiences from the start. Making the transition equitable means providing effective supports for children from low-income communities, children experiencing homelessness, children with disabilities, children experiencing adverse childhood experiences or other trauma and chronic stress, and dual language learners (children who are learning both their home language and English). It is important that the transition into kindergarten supports all students in an equitable and comprehensive

manner. Understanding the components of a comprehensive and effective transition system can help state leaders steadily make improvements and monitor these changes over time.

States have made some progress on this issue, yet knowing exactly where to begin or how to improve existing systems can be difficult. This Policy Brief highlights the variety of student experiences prior to kindergarten; focuses on the importance of early education and health; and provides a comprehensive set of state policy strategies, examples and considerations that enable the conditions for successful transitions.

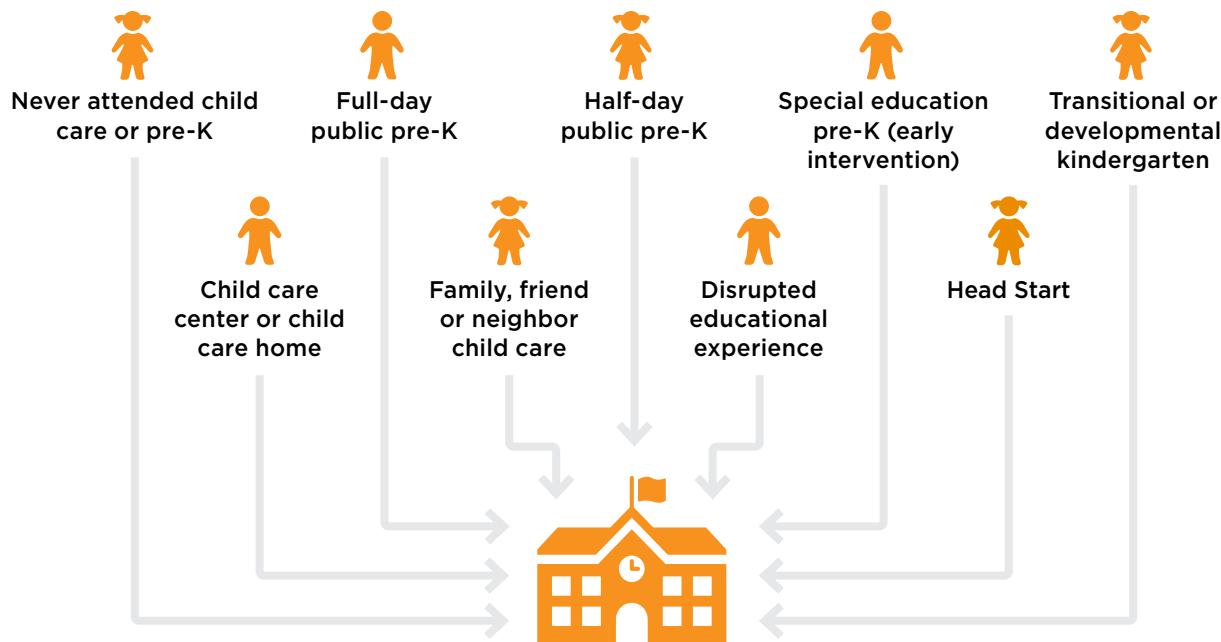


## Understanding and Adapting to Children's Diverse Experiences Prior to Kindergarten

The COVID-19 pandemic put extra stress on families while also compounding the educational inequities present prior to the pandemic. This makes it all the more important to understand children's experiences before kindergarten. It is important for schools and teachers to establish practices leading up to the first day of kindergarten and practices that continue throughout the kindergarten year. It's also important that education policymakers address the needs of children regardless of their previous experiences and support transition planning that will lead to more effective teaching and learning environments for K-3 students. Strategies for doing so include collecting and sharing data about children's learning and development prior to kindergarten; engaging families as partners;

and involving all the adults who interact with young children, including those in child care settings and health care and community organizations.

Actions by state education, health and social service agencies reflect the importance of connecting with families before their children reach school age to improve readiness for and experiences in kindergarten. Through formal regulatory changes and guidance documents for local early childhood providers and school districts, state policymakers are setting standards for how best to support young children and their families in critical years prior to kindergarten entry. Examples include requiring districts to establish connections with preschool programs and requiring transition plans to be developed.



**Not all formal child care and pre-K programs are accessible and high quality, and not all children enter kindergarten with experience in a formal setting.**



## Health Equity in Transitions

Research shows that student health and school readiness are closely linked, as children are more likely to succeed academically when they enter kindergarten healthy and ready to engage in the learning environment. Additionally, education is a social determinant of health; higher academic achievement is linked to better health outcomes later in life — for example, academic success can lead to better paying jobs with strong medical benefits. This bidirectional relationship can be supported through access to high-quality early learning environments, which include effective transitions into kindergarten.

Students and families making the transition from early learning settings to kindergarten face several challenges, including inequitable access to health services and supports. These inequities may be influenced by several factors, including the type of early learning setting, program requirements, coordination among systems, community and family resources, and student demographics. Improving access to health services and supports for all students during this transition is key to ensuring long-term health and success in school — and state leaders play a role in ensuring equitable service delivery and collaboration across systems.

While physical and mental health concerns impact all student populations, some students are more vulnerable to experiencing health problems as a result of the economic, environmental and social conditions in which they live and learn — as well as existing systemic challenges present in public health and education systems. Persistent health concerns that affect learning are more pronounced among students who already experience societal disadvantages, including students of color and students who live in poverty. (The term “students of color” refers to individuals who identify as African American or Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Latinx or Pacific Islander. Specific student groups are referenced where applicable data exist.)

For example, Black children, Mexican-American children and children living in poverty experience higher rates of [untreated dental cavities](#), a problem associated with increased school absences and academic difficulties. Similarly, [rates of asthma](#) — a condition that is also closely tied with increased school absences — are higher among Black and Puerto Rican children. Rates of [adverse childhood experiences](#) — events during childhood that can have negative effects on health, well-being and opportunity — are also disproportionately high among students of color and students living in poverty.

[Research points](#) to critical health services that can have a profound impact on students’ long-term health and academic success. Those services include screenings and treatment or referrals for concerns related to both physical and mental wellness, including oral health, asthma, vision and hearing, and social and emotional supports. State leaders have worked to address some of these issues at the intersection of health and education by instituting health screening requirements and training for school staff on key issues, such

as childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

According to a [recent analysis](#) of state statute and regulation, most states require a general health screening in elementary school. At least 24 states address dental health screenings, 34 address hearing screenings and 41 address vision screenings. Unfortunately, [research shows](#) variation in implementation of these requirements, and there is work to be done to ensure states have comprehensive screening and referral systems for students facing health-related barriers to academic success. Additionally, [at least 27 states](#) and the District of Columbia have provisions in statute or regulation to require or encourage teacher training and professional development on student mental health and trauma-informed practices; [several states](#) have enacted related legislation in recent years. At least [43 states](#) and the District of Columbia have statutes or regulations defining social and emotional learning and character education, with several including these principles in school readiness, academic standards, and teacher preparation and/or professional development.

It is also crucial for states to consider coordinating their health and early education systems to support goals related to school readiness. [Oregon provides](#) an example of how states can coordinate their health care and early education reforms. As Oregon worked to transform both its early education and health systems, state leaders collaborated to ensure similar structures were in place for its coordinated care organizations (health) and Early Learning Hubs (early education). These similar structures enabled the state to institute clear alignment activities, including combining multiple funding streams, forming advisory groups to improve accountability and outcomes, and developing shared expectations among various stakeholder groups.



# Policy Strategies to Improve Transitions

There are numerous policy strategies that states can — and have — implemented to improve outcomes during this transition period. These are developed and funded by both federal and state governments.

## Preschool Development Grants Birth Through Five

Preschool Development Grants Birth Through Five (PDG B-5), from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, are designed to support states in their efforts to improve and align their birth-to-age-5 [education and care systems](#) (e.g., home visits, infant and toddler supports, child care, pre-K, kindergarten and more). The work resulting from the grants represents what the future of state policy surrounding early childhood transitions may look like. (There have been two rounds of Preschool Development Grants authorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act. The first grants were awarded at the end of 2018. These grants were given to 46 states or territories to conduct a statewide birth through five needs assessment and to conduct strategic planning. In December 2019, 23 states received PDG B-5 renewal grants to implement their strategic plans.) The transition portions of states' strategic plans generally fall into the following categories:

### Transition Planning to Support Child

**Outcomes.** In its initial PDG B-5 planning grant, **Colorado** identified a cohesive state transitions strategy as critical for improving long-term student outcomes. State leaders

have used PDG B-5 funds to host a series of summits where national experts, families, early childhood providers and elementary schools convene to develop and refine local transition policies. Renewal funds will also help the state education agency create a roadmap for child care providers and local education agencies to improve support for children transitioning into the early elementary grades.

### Transition Planning in Needs Assessments.

The **Michigan** Department of Education's PDG B-5 renewal grant puts families at the center of all state guidance and support for early childhood transitions. The needs assessment conducted as part of the initial PDG B-5 grant in Michigan revealed a lack of trust and understanding among families of the early childhood system as a key inhibitor to the ability of state and local actors to engage children and families throughout transitional periods. The state plans to ramp up its communication strategies to ensure parents feel informed, empowered and involved throughout their child's early childhood experiences.

### Resources for Transition Planning. **Florida** set

aside a portion of its renewed PDG B-5 funds to provide support to early childhood providers and local education agencies with plans for supporting transitions. Awarding subgrants to proposals for local transition supports will allow the state to collect data and evaluate the impacts of local initiatives to inform possible future state guidance on early childhood and kindergarten transitions.

## State Policy Examples

---

States and districts have been very active in developing policies to improve this critical transition period, including aligning and coordinating early learning programs from [pre-K through third grade](#), creating planning tools to assist early learning programs in crafting effective transitions, providing technical assistance supports and guidance for districts, and establishing pilot programs to identify best practices.

**Alignment and Coordination:** **Alabama** is now in its fourth year of implementing the Pre-K Through 3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning (P-3), a program designed to improve transitions for students exiting the state's First Class Pre-K program into kindergarten and beyond. The [P-3 program](#) aims to improve instruction by aligning and coordinating standards, instructional practices, environments and professional development across the P-3 continuum; using instructional coaches with experience in early childhood education to improve teacher practice; and requiring horizontal and vertical team meetings to ensure [alignment within the continuum](#). Leadership is centered on a year-long Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy that is required for principals of schools that are a part of the P-3 program.

The **North Carolina** Department of Public Instruction also encouraged support for children transitioning from early childhood settings to kindergarten using the Every Student Succeeds Act as an entry point for the development of formal memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between local Head Start agencies and school districts. To receive Title I education funds, North Carolina districts must commit to coordination agreements with Head Start providers. The [guidance](#)

[document](#) introducing the coordination requirement identifies tools for Head Start and school district staff to work together so that children, families and teachers are prepared for the start of kindergarten. Specific recommended elements of MOUs include data and records sharing, professional development opportunities for teachers and wraparound supports for young children in the years prior to kindergarten entry.

**Planning Tools:** In **Connecticut**, the state's department of education and office of early childhood released [guidance](#) and a planning tool for local education agencies using federal education funds. The planning tool is designed to help school district and elementary school leaders establish relationships with major child care providers, gather effective data to determine needs of children entering kindergarten, build strong connections with parents and families, and target high-quality services based on developmental needs of individual children. Leaders in Connecticut have tailored [technical assistance](#) and [webinars](#) to ensure effective use of transition tools in varied local contexts, and have established six communities of practice — drawn from districts with schools in improvement status — to develop and improve transition strategies at the school and district levels.

**Guidance and Technical Assistance:** **Illinois** demonstrated support for meaningful transitions by including information and recommended resources, such as the development of transition plans, in the [implementation guidance](#) for the statewide Preschool for All program. Illinois also established a Kindergarten Transition Advisory Committee, which [documented the components](#) of successful transition processes and the state and local policy levers needed to implement various activities and supports.

As part of the work implementing its PDG B-5 strategic plan, the Kindergarten Transition Advisory Committee asked stakeholders about the viability and applicability of [various recommendations](#); while many were deemed to be either unnecessary or already in place, recommendations for professional learning, parent engagement at the beginning of the school year and improved coordination with the child care community — especially those serving immigrant families — were widely supported.



## Policy Considerations for States

As state leaders embrace the importance of students' transition into kindergarten, they have a wide range of policy options to consider in supporting school districts. These considerations fall into three areas depending on the level of support needed from the state level.

### Cultivate Alignment, Collaboration and Coordination

- Encourage collaboration between health and early education systems to support goals related to school readiness, and work to coordinate opportunities for innovation.
- Encourage school districts to engage, collaborate and partner with Head Start programs and other early childhood programs, using formal mechanisms such as a memorandum of agreement or understanding. State agencies can create templates for partners to use as the basis for collaborative planning.
- Share data across settings so that early childhood providers and kindergarten teachers understand what children know and are able to do at specific stages of development.

**Pilots to Develop Best Practices:** The **Rhode Island** Department of Education is engaged in work to improve kindergarten transitions for children across the state. The state has supported [three communities](#) in developing and implementing kindergarten transition plans. The department also held two statewide summits, inviting teachers and administrators from both elementary schools and community pre-K programs, to inform their transition efforts.

- Provide school leaders with connections to licensed child care centers and family child care homes in their communities to facilitate and encourage relationships between them. Strategies could include joint professional learning opportunities, coordinated meet-and-greet activities, participation on planning councils and encouragement to coordinate activities as part of funding applications.
- Remove barriers and provide incentives for establishing data-sharing agreements across early care and education, child welfare and health systems.

### Support Transition Planning

- Incentivize school districts to support family engagement during the summer by creating summer bridge programs, authentic and appropriate orientation programs, home visits and other supports for families not yet in the school system.
- Provide financial supports to districts to implement age-appropriate health, mental health and social and emotional screenings for students to determine where health

barriers exist and to develop a plan to intervene early and address those barriers.

- Encourage or require developmental assessments for all young children before kindergarten entry, often in coordination with [Child Find activities](#), subsidy programs and other supports.
- Include transition activities — such as detailed community-wide plans, connections with community providers, and review and use of data — in monitoring protocols used by the state department of education.
- Require meaningful and ongoing transition activities, including an early childhood landscape analysis, for schools that are in school improvement status.
- Gather information on models of effective transition practices at the local level that can be shared with school and community leaders across the state.

## Provide Guidance and Technical Assistance

---

- Consider funding technical assistance to support the collaboration and coordination required at the community level to support transition activities. An example is providing professional development and data-sharing

opportunities at the state and district levels that include child care providers, pre-K and kindergarten paraprofessionals, teachers, center directors and elementary school principals.

- Provide professional development for all personnel to understand the connection between physical and mental health and wellness and academic achievement.
- Develop guidance to encourage the individualized education program process to include and support transitions for children moving between early intervention programs and early elementary programs.
- Include transition policies and activities in state-level planning committees, such as a State Early Learning Council.
- Develop state professional learning modules for teachers, child care providers and school leaders that include specific and actionable activities that support transition with a focus on equity concerns, implicit bias, and effective and authentic family engagement practices.
- Provide guidance that aligns and coordinates teacher and leader expectations, classroom management, assessments, learning environments and professional development across pre-K and kindergarten experiences.





# About the Authors

## Laura Bornfreund

---



As director of early and elementary policy with the education policy program at New America, Laura leads a team of writers and analysts working on new ideas for improving children's birth-through-third grade learning experiences. Contact Laura at [bornfreund@newamerica.org](mailto:bornfreund@newamerica.org).

## Danielle Ewen

---



As principal at EducationCounsel, Danielle works on issues of child care and early education policy and has extensive experience at the federal and state levels. Contact Danielle at [danielle.ewen@educationcounsel.com](mailto:danielle.ewen@educationcounsel.com).

## Aaron Loewenberg

---



As a policy analyst with the education policy program at New America, Aaron provides research and analysis on policies that impact children from birth through third grade. Contact Aaron at [loewenberg@newamerica.org](mailto:loewenberg@newamerica.org).

## Davida McDonald

---



As a senior policy advisor at EducationCounsel, Davida works primarily on issues of early care and education policy, at the federal and state levels. Contact Davida at [davida.mcdonald@educationcounsel.com](mailto:davida.mcdonald@educationcounsel.com).



# About the Authors

## Alyssa Rafa



As a policy analyst, Alyssa focuses on various policy topics, including school climate and discipline, accountability and school improvement, and student health. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, Alyssa earned a master's degree in international studies from the University of Denver and worked in public health policy. When Alyssa is not researching education policy trends, she can be found traveling, visiting her family or enjoying the Colorado mountains. Contact Alyssa at [arafa@ecs.org](mailto:arafa@ecs.org) or **303.299.3691**.

## Matt Weyer



As a senior policy analyst, Matt focuses on early learning issues. Prior to joining the Education Commission of the States, Matt worked for over four years covering early learning issues for the National Conference of State Legislatures, earned his doctorate in educational leadership and policy studies from the University of Denver and was a kindergarten teacher in a bilingual classroom for Denver Public Schools. When Matt is not working, he can be found snowboarding or trail running in beautiful Colorado. Contact Matt at [mweyer@ecs.org](mailto:mweyer@ecs.org) or **303.299.3626**.

